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JAMES HOGG  
AND  
HIS POETRY

By  
WILLIAM WALLACE, LL.D.

The Knickerbocker Press  
27 and 29 West Twenty-third Street,  
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## James Hogg and his Poetry

THE personality of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, is one of the most likable in Scottish literature; and that may be said even more truly of the Hogg of history than of the Hogg of phantasy, to use Professor Ferrier's phrase, who is enshrined in "Noctes Ambrosianæ." These are two quite distinct personalities, for the real Hogg was not voluble in conversation, but could only emit an occasional quaint or poetical flash; he was convivial, but not a gourmand; he was simply an untaught shepherd, endowed with poetical genius, the proper issue of a race of pious, unaffected, superstitious country folk, a noble specimen in physique and *morale* of the peasantry of Scotland, capable of bearing adversity with indomitable cheerfulness, a true singer, and unequalled in any literature, at least in the poetic realisation of fairyland. The word Border poetry calls up inevitably in the mind not only the ballads collected and imitated by Scott—who, by the way, drew from the memory's store of, among others, Hogg's mother—not only Lady Grisell Baillie, Jane Elliot of Minto,

and Mrs. Cockburn; but pre-eminently James Hogg, who was the first to be consciously inspired by the characteristic Border scenery of round green hills, lonely glens, and clear rushing streams, who made Yarrow, Ettrick, and St. Mary's Loch into poetical symbols, and has drawn to the country innumerable pilgrims of sentiment from Wordsworth down.

Hogg was born at the end of 1770, in a cottage on the bank of the Ettrick, Selkirkshire. The name Hogg is a corruption of the Scandinavian Haig, still preserved by the ancient family of Bemersyde. His father, Robert, was descended from a line of Border shepherds, and, like his son after him, saved money enough to stock a sheep farm, only to involve himself in difficulties and descend to his original rank a few years after James' birth, when the poet's short school life of some six months in all came to an end.

At seven Hogg was a cowherd barely knowing how to write, and able with pains only to read the Bible, but doubtless well stocked with the ballads and legendary lore of Ettrick Forest (Selkirkshire), of which his mother was a repository. In the naïve and self-complacent "Memoirs of the Author's Life," he retails the recollections of his hard life with a wealth of detail; how, though it would "scarcely be be-

lieved," he loved a rosy-cheeked maiden at eight, served a dozen masters before he was fifteen, and never served one without getting a verbal recommendation to the next, "especially for my inoffensive behaviour"; how he remembered "being particularly bare of shirts"; how he bought a violin when he was fourteen, and learned the Psalms of David by heart. His youth, receptive as it must have been to the influence of his environment, was plainly uninfluenced by literature in any shape save only Routh. He confesses that he read "The Life and Adventures of Sir William Wallace" and "The Gentle Shepherd" in his eighteenth year without emotion or appreciation. But the father of Blackhouse (father of his and Scott's friend, William Laidlaw), whom the poet served for ten years from 1790, had a library, and on the hillside the Shepherd read Milton, Pope, and Thomson. His mind was stirred, and at last he began to write; but not till an incentive came from a more fortunate quarter.

A half-witted fellow met him on the hill one day, and repeated to him the whole of "Tam o' Shanter." Burns had just died. Hogg had never heard of him, and when the "natural" related the story of the farmer poet and singer, the Shepherd's emulation was moved, and so

his first painful essays in composition were lyric. Professor Veitch, himself a Border poet, has pictured once for all the genesis of Hogg's verse-making:

“I like to picture Hogg at this period, as he herded on the Hawkshaw Rig, up the Douglas Burn—a dark heathery slope of the Blackhouse Heights, which divide the Blackhope Burn from the other main feeders of the Douglas. There, on a summer day, during these ten years, you would find on the hill a ruddy-faced youth, of middle height, of finely symmetrical and agile form, with beaming light blue eyes, and a profusion of light brown hair that fell over his shoulders, long, fair, and lissome as a woman's. Now it was here in those long summer days, that extend from morn to gloamin', and amid similar scenes in Ettrick and in Yarrow, that this simple, untaught, yet impassioned shepherd lad, with his heart full of the lore his mother and grey-haired men had taught him, developed the peculiar cast of his poetic genius. It was thus he learned to love simple, free, solitary nature so intensely; it was thus that his heart soared with and yearned after the 'Skylark' of a morning, and swelled into lyric passion of an evening, 'When the Kye comes Hame'; it was thus he learned to conceive those exquisite visions of Fairy and



Fairyland which he has embodied in 'Kilmeny,' to feel and express the power of the awful and weird in a way such as almost no modern poet has expressed them, as in 'The Fate of Macgregor,' 'The Abbot M'Kinnon,' 'The Witch of Fife,' and others—to revel, in a word, in a remote, ideal, supersensible, yet most ethereal beauty and grandeur, which has a spell we do not seek to analyse."

Hogg's songs were written to be sung by the farm girls, and quickly became part of the currency of the musical over a wide district. The first to attain the dignity of print was "Donald Macdonald," written in 1800 in defiance of French invasion. It was at once popular, but Hogg complained that "no one ever knew or inquired who was the author." About this time Scott found him out, and encouraged him to persevere. In 1801 he published a still-born volume of "Scottish Pastorals," but he had to suffer his first serious reverse of fortune before he commenced publishing in earnest. With £200 he had saved he took in 1804 a lease of a Hebridean sheep farm; the speculation failed in the inception, and penniless he betook himself to shepherding in Nithsdale.

When the first volume of Scott's "Minstrelsy" appeared, Hogg thought to rival his friend's performance, and with that friend's

countenance Constable brought out for him "The Mountain Bard," a small collection of original ballads, mostly of poor quality and little promise. By this book, however, and an essay, "The Shepherd's Guide," generally called "Hogg on Sheep," he made £300, and straightway started farming again. He began on too large a scale, and once more his purse was emptied. This second failure turned his country-folk against him; no one would hire him again as a shepherd, and in February, 1810, he went to Edinburgh, and set about making a living by his pen.

It was a hard struggle, but Grieve, a native of the Forest, in business in the capital, gave him a home. He wrote hard; bundled all the songs he had by him into "The Forest Minstrel," which did not pay, although the Countess of Dalkeith gave him one hundred guineas for the dedication; started a weekly journal, "The Spy," the greater part of which, prose and verse, he contributed himself, and which died within a year; and dallied with the drama—in vain. He made many friends, and retained, in spite of his querulous vanity, the affection of Scott, who tried hard to get him a permanent post of some kind; and the hard-headed Shepherd never lost his head in an ultra-convivial society, though the jollities of

a mad Right and Wrong Club cost him a dangerous illness.

After three years of unprofitable labour and scheming, journalising, and quarrelling with publishers, he made a hit in 1813—and it was a great hit—with “The Queen’s Wake.” But though it won fame for him, it brought him little cash, his publisher having failed just after the issue of the third edition. Profit, however, came in other ways. In Principal Shairp’s words, the book “secured for him the acquaintance of Wilson, Lockhart, Southey, Wordsworth, even Byron—made him, in fact, free of that great poetic brotherhood which then illumined England.” Byron commended the work to John Murray, who became Hogg’s London publisher and his friend. To relieve his pressing necessity the poet again appealed to the Duchess of Buccleuch (the Countess of Dalkeith, to whom “The Forest Minstrel” was dedicated), and at her behest, after her death in the following year, 1814, the Duke gave him at a nominal rent the small farm of Altrive Lake on the Yarrow. Having no capital, he conceived the idea of getting some by a book of poems contributed by his distinguished friends; but Scott declining on the characteristic plea that “every herring should hing by its ain heid,” Hogg parodied him, Words-

worth, Byron, Southey, Coleridge, Wilson, and himself in "The Poetic Mirror." He published also two volumes of dramatic tales, which were unsuccessful, and Scott, Blackwood, and others helped him to bring out an illustrated edition of "The Queen's Wake."

For the rest of his life Hogg was a farmer-littérateur who, while fully conscious of the considerable place he had won in the world of letters, was spurred to write mainly by the necessity of making good by his pen his losses on sheep. Here is a catalogue of his later works: 1815, "The Pilgrims of the Sun"; 1816, "Mador of the Moor"; 1817, "The Brownie of Bodsbeck" (a prose tale of the Covenanting persecution); 1819-20, "Jacobite Relics of Scotland" (two volumes of verse collected by him in numerous journeys to the Highlands, together with some of his own best lyrics on Highland and "Prince Charlie" themes); 1820, "Winter Evening Tales" (prose); 1822, "The Three Perils of Man" (prose tales); 1823, "The Three Perils of Woman" (ditto); 1824, "Confessions of a Fanatic" (ditto); 1826, "Queen Hynde" (epic poem); 1829, "The Shepherd's Calendar" a collection of articles contributed to "Blackwood's Magazine"; 1834, "Lay Sermons," "The Domestic Manners and Public Life of

Sir Walter Scott," and the first of a series of "Montrose Tales."

All the while he kept up his connection with Edinburgh. Robert Chambers has told of the rude conviviality which his visits provoked in a circle that loved and admired him. "Maga," Lockhart, and Wilson used and abused him; it was to the seventh number of the magazine that he contributed the famous "Chaldee Manuscript" (not all his, of course) which can only be mentioned here. He was a hospitable host to his neighbours, and to the crowds of pilgrims who made Altrive almost as sacred a shrine as Abbotsford. Wordsworth visited him in 1814, and he repaid the visit at Rydal. The relationship with Scott was never broken. To his neighbours he was a "kind-hearted chield" who "gied himsel' nae airs." Had he been content to farm Altrive he might have had leisure to produce better work; but when he married in 1820 Margaret Phillips, an Anandale woman slightly above him in social standing, he took on also at a high rent the farm of Mount Benger on the opposite bank of the Yarrow, and lost £2000 before his seven years' lease was out.

In 1832, he visited London and was fêted by the literary world: Carlyle says he talked and behaved like a "gomeril" (donkey), and

wore a plaid at the suggestion of his publisher for the time, who straightway failed, after the manner of Hogg's publishers. He died of a liver complaint in November, 1835.

It is impossible to deny Hogg's genius. All that may be legitimately said in depreciation of the mass of rubbish and commonplace which he produced merely throws into stronger relief the perfection of his achievement in "Kilmeny" and "The Skylark." His "Mador of the Moor" and "Queen Hynde" are poor enough journeyman's manufacture. For his form and measures he went frankly enough to school to Scott and Bishop Percy. His vocabulary is not rich, and close as he comes to the heart of nature in descriptive poetry, his fidelity to epithets such as "brown mountain," which he has conventionalised, is irritating. He prided himself on his knowledge of the Scotch language, but was not in reality an expert, and sinned as deeply as Chatterton in the use of the sham antique. Yet all his work that deserves to be remembered is original in every sense of the word; much of it is in a class by itself, and a high class at that. He was inordinately vain, yet his apostrophe to Scott is not altogether ludicrous: "Ye can never suppose that I belong to your school of chivalry. Ye are the king o' that school, but I 'm king



o' the mountain and fairy school, which is a far higher ane than yours." It is true, as Shairp put it, that "no other poet in our language has ever described fairyland so well, or embodied the whole underworld of ghosts, spectres, wraiths, brownies, water-kelpies, with such an eerie, thrilling sense of reality." Among painters of nature, too, despite the tendency to stereotyped epithet noticed before, Hogg occupies a high place. He was veritably inspired by the mountain and the moor,

The glowing suns of spring,  
The genial shower and stealing dew,

the "lea" starred with "snowy gems." He had

Viewed the Errick waving clear,  
When shadowy flocks of purest snow  
Seemed grazing in a world below ;

and wrote of sun and storm, green hills and wild birds, not so much for the purpose of painting a definite background for action as because he had to find a vent for the emotions which Nature roused in him. His skill in the portrayal of action was indeed variable; compare the success of "The Witch of Fife," in which interest is divided between the action and the environment of nature and demonology, with the comparative failure of "Earl Walter," a ballad of action pure and simple.

They were healthy thoughts that came to him in the ten years of his making on the Douglas Burn. The skylark was an "emblem of happiness." "The sheeted flame and sounding rain," "heaven's own breast and mountain torn" by the thunder, were to him "nature's grand turmoil." There is not a trace of the morbid in his poetry. Like Kilmeny herself his handling of the world of romance, of Border violence, witchcraft and fairy, is "pure as pure could be." Hogg had no conception of what is grandiloquently called "architectonic" in literature. He failed to write even a passable long poem, for even "The Queen's Wake" is saved by part of its contents only; he invented no new form of verse, and attained no particular skill in the heroic couplet which Scott's example lured him to essay. But his best ballads are almost of the first class, though most are utterly spoiled by verbiage and prolixity. His best songs are among the best of their class; in these he attained the perfection of form as by instinct. It is no more a disparagement of him to say that he imitated his predecessors and contemporaries than to say of Burns that he imitated Fergusson. His success in "The Poetic Mirror" suggests that, with a finer appreciation of form in literature, he might have gone far in departments into



which he did not seek to enter. Considering his origin and his native habit of mind, the restraint of his humour is remarkable.

As to his personality it only requires to be added that if his alleged rudeness is worth discussion, Professor Ferrier has probably come nearest the mark in his appreciation:

“There was a hearty homeliness of manner about Hogg, and a Doric simplicity of address, which were exceedingly prepossessing. He sometimes carried a little too far the privileges of an innocent rusticity . . . but in general his slight deviations from etiquette were rather amusing than otherwise.”

We can still laugh at the story of Hogg's first visit to the Scotts when, finding Mrs. Scott extended upon one sofa, he stretched his brawny limbs upon another; and in his address to his host and hostess progressed in the course of the evening from “Mr. Scott” through “Shirra” (sheriff) to “Walter” and “Wattie,” and from “Mrs. Scott” to “Charlotte.” But it seems ludicrous to the present generation that any one should have been deeply offended by his “Domestic Manners, &c.,” or that Lockhart in his turn could have been charged with malignity for his references to Hogg in the “Life.” And one cannot wish that he had been modester, since his

vanity enriched literature with the story of his resentment of the fancied slight he suffered at Wordsworth's hands at Rydal.

In this volume\* an attempt has been made to confine selection to what of Hogg's work deserves to survive. Only "The Queen's Wake" has been printed entire, although a considerable proportion of it is as second-rate as "Mador of the Moor" and Hogg's other ambitious essays, which are as dead as "Thalaba." His prose scarcely fails to be noticed here; but it may be said that he derived his inspiration in this medium also from Scott, and that, working upon ample materials, historical, adventurous, tragic, magical, he combined great fluency with supreme weakness in construction. His "Confessions of a Fanatic," which has been erroneously ascribed to other hands, is, however, perfect in its way, and shows what Hogg could have done had he but taken pains to master the art which Scott himself had to learn. But art was to Hogg, as readers of "The Queen's Wake" will see, something to be eschewed as inimical to inspiration.

\* The article forms the introduction to a selection of James Hogg's poems edited and annotated by Professor William Wallace, LL.D. Isbister & Co., Ltd.



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